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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses how school effectiveness and school improvement, as they have been interpreted in United Kingdom central and local government policy, have affected schools and other educational bodies connected with them. It draws on Michael Power's book, "The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification," to understand the appeal of this form of research to politicians and administrators. Reflecting on a number of perspectives on failure, including official views and those from schools and local authorities that have been designated as failing, the argument is made that the creation of the two polar opposites (good/effective and failing/ineffective) has exacerbated rather than diminished differences between the two. If concepts of the audit are to continue, such as those employed to rate whether schools are successful or not, an ethical framework for school effectiveness research is needed that is better able to encourage and support the teachers, partners, governors, and students involved. (Contains 23 references.) (Author/SM)

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AUDITING FAILURE: MORAL COMPETENCE AND SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS

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Auditing Failure: moral competence and school effectiveness

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Abstract

This presentation addresses how school effectiveness and school improvement, as they have been interpreted through UK central and local government policy, have affected schools and other educational bodies connected with them. It draws on Power's conceptualisation of the Audit Society, to understand the appeal of this form of research to politicians and administrators. Reflecting on a number of perspectives on failure, including official views and those from schools and local authorities that have been designated as 'failing', the argument is made that the creation of the two polar opposites – good/effective and failing/ineffective – has exacerbated rather than diminished differences between the two. If concepts of audit are to continue, such as those employed to rate whether schools are successful or not, an ethical framework for SER is needed which is better able to encourage and support the teachers, parents, governors and students involved.

> The school went into a spiral of decline frighteningly fast. It began with the retirement of a long-serving HT in 1997. The school year 1996/97 was a good one - it was a happy place, there were a number of excellent teachers, the school had a good local reputation and was involved in some new initiatives, results were in line with expectations or better (Chair of Governors).

School effectiveness has become *the* most important ideological and educational movement and discourse in the United Kingdom of the last ten years. It has grown from a relatively modest special research interest group in the 1980s to a national and, indeed, an international force. Reynolds and Teddie (2000) claim that SER has achieved high standing internationally, developed an agreed methodology, generated

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a new knowledge base, and made a significant impact on educational change. Further, they claim, SER has destroyed the myth about the impotence of education, and that schools can do little to change the society around them. Thus, SER has enhanced professional esteem by showing that teachers are important determinants of children's educational and social attainments. Reynolds and Teddie express puzzlement about their treatment by critics; 'it seems difficult to square them with our positive achievements', they say. Their critics, they assert, are either ignorant, hostile to those who challenge the education status quo, do not share school effectiveness researchers' technological orientation, or are guilty of academic snobbery.

This is one view of SER. In this presentation I want to offer another. First, I provide a framework for understanding why SER in the UK has developed in the way it has, drawing on Michael Power's recent book *The Audit Society: rituals of verification* (Power, 1999). I then give a brief, critical overview of school effectiveness research, its concept of failure and some responses from those most affected. An emphasis in this presentation is on the need to develop an ethics of school effectiveness research, similar to that termed 'moral competence' by Power (1999) and 'moral responsibility' by Bauman (1989)

The Audit Society

The main gist of Power's argument is that during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the word 'audit' was increasingly adopted in Britain in a wide variety of contexts. Audit as a concept was extended beyond finance to, for example, environmental issues, management, medicine and education. Power argues that Britain became an audit society, that is one having a certain set of attitudes to problem solving as a consequence of the shift from the centralist post-war welfare state to today's devolved risk society. As central government divests itself of responsibility for public institutions, checks and audits are substituted to promote efficiency and or, as it is also termed, value-for-money (VFM).

> The idea of audit shapes public conceptions of the problems for which it is the solution: it is constitutive of a certain regulatory or control style which reflects deeply held commitments to checking and trust (p. 7)

A related concept used by Neave (1998) is that of the Evaluative State - 'as a response to government demands for "greater quality institutional efficiency and enterprise" and the introduction of the market as a supreme relating principle' (Neave, 1998, p. 268). Neave identifies two different discourses framing the Evaluative State at the end of the 1980s. One which predominated in Europe (especially France, Sweden, Belgium and Spain) and had as its goal, political modernisation. The other came mainly from the US (though evident also in the UK and Netherlands), and was economically orientated, and 'tinged with technical determinism' (Neave, 1998, p. 272)

Audits (or evaluations) of effectiveness have drawn particular criticism for supporting abstract management styles at the expense of other cultures of performance evaluation and for being dysfunctional.

> Nowhere is this issue more apparent than in the audit of 'effectiveness' or performance. It is well known that in many service sectors the notion of effectiveness is not easily calibrated and may be relative to different bodies of knowledge…There is some evidence that VFM audits tend to prioritise that which can be measured and audited in economic terms – efficiency and economy – over that which is perhaps more ambiguous from this point of view – effectiveness or performance….Auditing…. may have dysfunctional side effects and there is a need for greater empirical understanding of the consequences of the audit. In short, auditing needs to be evaluated (p. 13).

Four interrelating elements constitute the audit society:

Democracy:

> the opening up of organisations to public scrutiny, judging fit-for-purpose and VFM

Surveillance:

> representing a shift from paternalist centralism to self-inspection, self-evaluation and self representation (viz. performance management or performativity).

Trust:

involving practices which must be trusted and are themselves trusting

Risk:

a response to the need to process uncertainty.

Yet, parallel to the politics of success as a victory narrative, argues Power, lies a politics of failure which attracts a continual re-intensification of available instruments of regulatory control.

The importance of Power's and Neave's work is that it shows that the form of practice we have come to recognise in Britain as an OFSTED inspection, is at one level fairly random – the criteria of effectiveness adopted could be pretty much anything - and at another, part of a trend within the audit society (or evaluative state) at a time of risk. Along with globalisation and the spread of new discourses of public service management, the audit society extends beyond the idiosyncrasies of party politicians or government bureaucrats, although responsibility for its enactment lies with them

School Effectiveness in Context

School effectiveness researchers' articulation of aims and values goes something like this. SER seeks, above all else, to establish that 'school matters' and that 'schools can make a difference'. This stance is partly a response to longstanding research evidence from the 1950s onwards in the UK and elsewhere (e.g. Coleman et al, 1966) showing that most school variables make little difference to school outcomes compared to the influence of students 'social' characteristics such as social class and ethnic background. The belief for several decades that 'education cannot compensate for society' (Bernstein, 1970) led to an impasse in which the education system generally and schools and teachers in particular were cast as the hapless and helpless dupes in capitalism's project of creating winners and losers. This structuralist view of the powerlessness of teachers and schools to influence their students' destiny was challenged, among others, by school effectiveness researchers. Encouraged by a study in the UK suggesting that there was a 'causal' relationship between school process and children's progress (Rutter et al, 1979), and drawing on management and systems theory and complex statistical methodologies, successive studies sought to refine and extend this work.

In the 1990s when educational change (both neo-conservative and neo-liberal) was on various governments' agendas, SER claimed to have the mechanisms for identification of schools that were 'effective' in achieving set targets and goals relating to specific assessments and examinations. Not surprisingly, this was an attractive proposition for policymakers and politicians. School effectiveness advocates were welcomed into the body of the state as effectiveness discourses became predominant. Advocates joined major policy-making bodies in key government departments and agencies (e.g. Teacher Training Agency (TTA), Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED)) as school effectiveness discourses became a commanding force in school (and later local authority) inspections, in-service programmes, and the allocation of research funding. In this way, research hypotheses became translated into surveillance and training techniques.

This high profile continued despite the fact that school effectiveness researchers were often candid about their inability to realise the movement's most ambitious aim - that of linking school effectiveness to school improvement. As Pam Sammons and David Reynolds admitted:

> Little is known about so-called 'ineffective' schools in contrast to the work on effectiveness. Moreover much less is known about how to effect change in schools. More research is needed on the context specificity and generalisability of results. And of course the controversial topic on what can be learnt from international comparisons remains a little explored although increasingly important theme (Sammons & Reynolds, 1997, p. 134)

Forced on a mainly unwilling, reform-tired and sceptical teaching force, the11or 12 school effectiveness characteristics were deemed as central to the development of an effective school. They carried with them measures of 'algorithmic certainty' as Morley and Rassool (1999, p.122) put it, so that it was less than surprising that school inspections and evaluations came to be based on them. If it was so easy to identify an effective school, that is, one having these characteristics, then the next logical step was to base school evaluations and inspections on them. In a speech in 1995, Michael

Barber, then New Labour politician and in 2000, head of the DfEE Standards and Effectiveness Unit, revealed the similarities between the then Conservative administration and New Labour concerning SER, policy-making and inspection:

> This country led the world in the study of school effectiveness but lagged behind in applying its lessons. This is no longer true. Furthermore, the interest in school effectiveness and school improvement goes far beyond schools. Many LEAs... have begun to develop a forward-looking, creative role promoting and encouraging school improvement...
> And school effectiveness fever (sic) can be found at national level too. The Department for Education has a School Effectiveness Division which displays a refreshing humility and whose decisions are evidently informed by research. The OFSTED framework, though far from perfect, is laced through with an understanding of school effectiveness (Barber, 1998, p. 18)

Few concessions were to be provided, for example, in the case of lower-resourced schools in the poorer urban areas. The argument was that there was to be *zero tolerance* of school failure. Regardless of intake, resources or community base, all schools were to be judged according to the same criteria. Showing much confidence in the inspection methodology adopted, Michael Stark of the DfEE claimed that it could measure effectiveness in a consistent way.

> The capacity to compare pupils' performance against a common baseline of National Curriculum assessment and national examinations takes us close to the point at which we can measure progress consistently between each different stage of the performance of the national cohort, and hence compare the performance of the children with the same prior attainment at different schools. This has shown the disparity of performance between schools and similar intakes into much sharper relief.
>
> Meanwhile the universal inspection of schools to a common set of criteria...have helped shift opinion, by proving that substantial improvements can be made at even the weakest schools (Stark, 1998, p. 37).

The technological circle was complete. SER identified both the criteria and technology to distinguish effective/failing, good/bad schools. The technological solution was grasped by government which needed a policy of allocating school, LEA and INSET resources and checking that they were used appropriately. OFSTED, a quasi-independent body established inspection regimes which ensured that schools and LEAs did what government wanted. What could be wrong with that?

Criticisms of School Effectiveness

A number of criticisms, however, have been levelled at SER. These may be summarised as follows.

- *SER has been abused by governments*. A number of senior academics e.g. Pring (1995), Elliott (1996), Hamilton (1996), and Willmott (1999) have argued that SER is much too ready to accommodate government wishes for simple solutions to complex policy issues. Concern to endear SER to government, has led to a tendency among researchers towards superficiality of interpretation and concentration on pragmatics.
- SER *oversimplifies schools as non-interacting entities* and as unconnected to other schools or to the wider community. However the 'market' model of schools endorsed by recent governments which pits one school against another, suggests just the opposite.
- The continuity of the link between past and future academic performance can be unstable as is evident in other areas of public and commercial life (Prosser, 2000). SER's *usefulness for future predictions of performance and effectiveness, therefore, 'may well be dubious'* (Rowe, 2000, p. 80)
- *Much SER is of limited use because of inadequate data.* Goldstein and Woodhouse (2000) argue that some SE reseachers are over optimistic about what SER technology can achieve. 'The real problem', they write, 'is to obtain valid and reliable data and a failure to do that is the point of much of the criticism'. They argue that MLM (multi-level modelling) is a powerful set of techniques for extracting interesting patterns but is only as good as the quality of the data presented to it.

- SER's conceptualisation of 'effective' and 'sick' schools tends *to oversimplify the problems and 'cures' of so-called failing schools*. It could be argued that all schools 'succeed' and 'fail' in some areas: the question is of degree and impact.
- SER's influence in the UK has *left previous patterns of winners and losers intact* despite the fact that many advocates see it as aiding the interruption of long-standing educational inequalities. The use of league tables has both underlined and exacerbated the fact that the largest number of failing schools are in the poorest areas.

Several years ago a South London headteacher Joe Rea and I (then head of the department of education at South Bank University) wrote about SER from the perspective of those working in institutions in poorer areas. We identified among a range of inadequacies regarding school effectiveness strategies:

- the inevitable low position of our institutions in effectiveness stakes, not because of poor teaching, poor management or low expectations but because of the way in which 'success' and 'failure' is measured.
- the demoralisation and powerlessness of staff, pupils and students living, studying and teaching in poorer urban areas, because they can *never be good enough*.
- the inability of such teachers to frame educational values according to the needs of students or the surrounding community or to challenge the dominant shift in educational values where it fails to meet school and community needs (Rea & Weiner, 1998).

School Failure

In this section I draw briefly on five individual responses to school failure: Michael Barber, the current Head of the DfEE Standards and Effectiveness Unit (and previous New Labour politician), Michael Stark, career civil servant and head of School Effectiveness in Barber's unit, David Crosby (pseudonym), the chair of governors of a primary school under special measures in the outer London area, Constance Brown (pseudonym), a classroom teacher and teacher union representative of a secondary school in a city in North England, also under special measures, and Derek Green

(pseudonym), an education officer of a 'failed' local education authority (LEA). Each is positioned differently in terms of the audit of education. To use the medical metaphors so beloved of SER, the two officials seem to see few problems with the SER approaches to the identification and treatment of school 'failure' – for them, it is a sickness that has to be rooted out even though it may in the process, kill the patient. The medical metaphor is employed by Stark as follows.

> A medical analogy may be helpful. The treatment that a sick person needs to recover is different from the regime that will make an ordinary person fit. Indeed a fitness regime imposed on invalids may make them worse. The same seems to apply to schools; competence must precede excellence…(Stark, 1998, p. 36).

The closure of the school can be equated to death, in the situation when there is little capacity for 'self-renewal'.

> Our definition of a failing school assumes that it has a very limited capacity for self-renewal. By definition, therefore, the fate of the school in these circumstances – 'in need of special measures' in government jargon – is to a large extent in the hands of external agencies in the early stages after an inspection…The threat of closure or the power to establish an educational association are important levers in ensuring sufficient pressure for change (Barber, 1998, p. 27)

The three people closer to the ground seem more sensitive to the havoc such 'treatment' may wreak both on the patients (the schools and LEAs) and the young people that it aims to benefit.

> The boys are, apparently, for the first time, asking 'when's the school shutting down?'. Special measures have almost wrecked the school, and hundreds of boys' education. (Teacher)

Inevitably people will hold different perspectives on 'failure', based on their positioning within it. So perhaps it is not at all surprising that the politician and the

bureaucrat display certainty that school effectiveness approaches are not only what is needed, but are empirically and technologically faultless. The other three are less sure, although they express some agreement with some of the things that the inspectors have written about their institutions.

> The new appointee had not had previous headship experience - nor had any of the other candidates interviewed. She seemed to have good enough experience and be the best qualified applicant but the appointment didn't work out at all, mainly for reasons I am not free to disclose. From Spring1998, some governors were already engaged in damage limitation and had tried to involve the LEA. (Governor)

> Although I did not see the school as likely to fail, I could at the time see weaknesses in management structure, particularly with the new head who was weak, and had very few leadership skills. He did not always back us up individually, tried to bully us (unsuccessfully for the most part) and seemed very good at doing nothing. He sometimes made the right noises but nothing happened. (Teacher)

> By the end of the inspection, we were given to understand that the inspection team would report that there were serious weaknesses (a very accurate judgement and none of it denied) but that there were also signs of hope from the new leadership. The message was 'support your local sheriff'. It was also, keep up the rigour and the pace of improvement. We should expect a re-inspection in a year's time.... I think the original OFSTED report is generally fair and balanced. (Education Officer)

These three are astute educational actors who recognise inadequacies in their institutions, yet express despair at their powerlessness over what the inspection process has done and is doing to their institutions, their colleagues, their students and themselves. For example, in the case of the secondary school:

> Since the initial inspection the standard of teaching and learning has been adjudged by HMI as getting worse and worse (bottoming out on the 5th

> Inspection and rising again to 75% by the 6th). We worked increasingly hard to do what the inspectors wanted us to do. Early on the head-teacher said all staff were good. Then he began to hint that some staff were incompetent, and started informal incompetency procedures against 5 members of staff....Even by their own indicators special measures were making things worse. After the sixth inspection when we all told by the LEA Chief Advisor that we were all one phone-call away from being sacked (yes, really) the head-teacher resigned. (Teacher)

In the schools, it was not the quality of the teaching but the power and responsibility that the head-teacher has accrued, as a consequence of school effectiveness discourses, that was the main factor in the derailment of the schools.

> Any system that allows one individual so much power is mad and dangerous and far too haphazard. More so when there is so much evidence of recruitment problems. The HT's power to damage a school can seem limitless. (Governor)

Significantly, the factors that the politician and bureaucrat identify as linked to failure – poor raw or value-adjusted scores – do not apply in the two schools reviewed here. Both schools performed more strongly in assessment and examinations before the inspection, particularly the secondary school. Performance scores fell after the inspection. In the secondary school, where the first inspection took place in 1998:

> | | |
> |---|---|
> | 1997 our exam results were A-Cs 5 or more | 33% |
> | 1998 | 32% |
> | 1999 | 22% |
> | 2000 | 26% |
>
> Even by their own indicators special measures were making things worse. (Teacher)

The point in including extracts from the five accounts here (see appendix for a fuller version) is not to provide 'proof' or generalisation; but rather to highlight the absence in the school effectiveness literature generally, of *critical* voices of teachers, governors, union representatives, education officers etc. Thus the regimes of truth

about effectiveness that are sustained, are managerial and technicist – and more in line with the requirements of government and policy-makers, than with others closer to the every day life of the schools. It is also evident that while practitioners are compelled to live with the consequences of professional failure, key educational actors such as Barber and Stark are not, and are thus able to speak from a position untouched and unthreatened by the audit process.

The politics and technology of failure created a re-intensification of regulatory control. Thus after the first failed secondary school inspection:

> A heavy monitoring process then ensued, giving teachers the feeling we were all useless and meant everyone felt under threat. Staff morale collapsed. Between 1997 and 2000 two thirds of the staff had left to be replaced initially by NQTs (with special dispensation from the DfEE no less), and supply teachers. Several teachers took early retirement… You become institutionalised into working ridiculous hours, beating yourself over the head because you're not perfect, constantly fearful of being caught doing anything less than the all singing all dancing lesson, having near-nervous breakdowns and worrying about the future of the school. (Teacher)

In the case of the LEA, the designation of failure had disastrous implications – which extended to the students in the schools.

To date the process has had the effect of:

- damaging Council and school relationships further;
- schools distancing themselves from the Council and from each other;
- putting Education Services Directorate in turmoil;
- senior staff leaving;
- draining expertise away from core tasks as well as from jobs;
- lowering morale all round,
- increasing public disaffection with the Council,
- antagonising staff associations and governors.

- and more damagingly than anything, pushing back the centrality of the children in schools, their present and their future. (Education Officer).

Creating Moral Competence

If we follow Power's argument, the audit society is with us and we are likely therefore to see little reduction in demands for accountability and audit. Indeed he asserts that 'it would be wrong to conclude that less auditing is desirable' (Power, 1999, p. 144). He argues rather for the need for moral competence to provide 'regulated forms of openness' audit.

This would include, for example, the development of criteria whereby audit can evaluate itself; for instance concerning identification with, and understanding of, the auditee; capacity to reflect on cultural bias; and possibilities for bringing the auditees into the audit process. In short, it is necessary to audit the auditors, an ironic extension to the audit society. In terms of failure, Power argues that:

> The politics of regulatory failure... must become reflexive if it is not to reproduce itself in ever increasing strictures of regulatory complexity with ever greater demands for monitoring' (p. 145).

When it comes to SER, and the inspection regime in England and Wales in particular, we can expect it to continue, at least in some form, regardless of which individuals head OFSTED or the DfEE. However, there are actions that are important if accountability is to be exacted from the auditors. These include:

1. Greater scrutiny and transparency of the empirical and conceptual claims of school effectiveness.
2. Questions about emphasis on the role of the leadership, and relative neglect of collegial and local support structures and capacity to influence i.e. what Power calls 'other forms of organisational intelligence'.
3. Examination of whether SER has helped to reduce educational inequality. Having more students gain more qualifications does not necessarily re-distribute life chances. It merely changes the nature of the obstacles. For

instance, girls may do well in school, but their success does not extend to the labour market.

4. Greater scrutiny of the implications of the strong inter-dependence between government and SER.
5. Development of a strong moral and ethical framework for SER. Significantly, some headway has already been made regarding the development of a code of ethics for performance indicators (Goldstein & Myers, 1996).

However adopting an ethical code for performance indicators which include *principles* (of contextualisation, uncertainty of presentation, multiple indicators, institutional rights), the *right to information* and the *avoidance of unwarranted harm* as Goldstein and Myers (1996) propose, in my view, does not go far enough.

As Bauman shows in his book *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Bauman, 1989), there is a danger in binding scientific rationality, bureaucracy and political ambition together within modernity, without at the same time developing 'moral responsibility' or 'moral capacity'. He argues that morality needs to be exercised (what he calls manipulated) not merely reproduced.

> And the moral capacity that is manipulated .... includes as well the ability to resist, escape and survive the [social] processing, so that at the end of the day the authority and the responsibility for moral choice rests where they resided at the start: with the human person (Bauman, 1989, p. 178).

In other words, individuals are obliged to take a stand morally, if they think, for example, that the state may be doing something of which they disapprove. One important way to do this in regard to SER, is for researchers and other educational actors to challenge and thus force a break in the technological circle of research, co-option, inspection and assignation of failure. SER's main critics have come from outside (see, for example, White and Barber, 1997: Slee, Weiner and Tomlinson, 1998; Morley and Rassool, 1999; Thrupp, 1999). I suggest that it is now time for insiders to pose some critical questions about SER.

One issue that has arisen in my study of the implications of 'failure' is the apparent ease with which those most distanced from the every-day experience of failure, are able to accept the inevitability of shock and havoc that such official designations cause. Again I have found Bauman helpful here. Bauman (1989, p. 192) identifies in the processes of modernity 'the social production of distance' which enables powerful bureaucrats to make intolerable decisions about others because they are not close enough to be emotionally affected by the outcomes.

> Being inextricably tied to human proximity, morality seems to conform to the law of the optical perspective. It looms large and thick close to the eye. With the growth of distance, responsibility for the other shrivels, moral dimensions of the object blur, till both reach the vanishing point and disappear from view (Bauman, 1989, p. 192).

To conclude, then, I suggest that the time is now past for SER's exploitation of the eagerness of governments for simple solutions to complex problems relating to what makes schools work. School effectiveness researchers can no longer deny responsibility for the manipulation and application of their research ideas and findings, which are often detrimental to schools and the students they purport to help. Rather, school effectiveness researchers have important tasks ahead of them; in particular, to close the social distance within SER and to develop a range of moral competencies which address the immediate practices and outcomes of SER. It is to this end that this paper has been written.

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Tale 1: The Politician

Failure is relative. It is often defined in relation to some expected norm....An ineffective school could be defined... as a school in which schools fail to progress as far as might be expected from a consideration of its intake. This definition would leave us looking at perhaps 20-30 per cent of schools...

However there are schools where the under-performance is more serious. OFSTED has two categories for these. There are those schools, which on the basis of OFSTED inspection, have been found to be failing and there are others which, while not technically failing, have been found to have serious weaknesses.

Responsibility for defining and identifying school failure rests, at national level, with the Office of Standards for Education. There is a local level of responsibility for identifying failure too, which lies with LEAs... OFSTED has, on the whole, had a bad press, at least among educators. There have been some problems with the inspection process and Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is inclined to be provocative.

Nevertheless it has changed the educational landscape for the better. The framework for inspection has been welcomed by governors, head-teachers and teachers and appears to be making a positive contribution to school improvement. The evidence suggests that in the period between the arrival of the [inspection] handbook and the call of the inspector, school improve as a result of a process of more or less formal self-review....'Improvement before inspection' might be a better summary of OFSTED's impact than 'improvement through inspection'...

The primary responsibility for promoting success and avoiding failure lies with the school. It is assumed for the purposes of the argument here that the vast majority of schools have both the will and the ability to drive their own improvement...

Our definition of a failing school assumes that it has a very limited capacity for self-renewal. By definition, therefore, the fate of the school in these circumstances - 'in need of special measures' in government jargon – is to a large extent in the hands of external agencies in the early stages after an inspection...The threat of closure or the power to establish an educational association are important levers in ensuring sufficient pressure for change...There is a fascinating story to tell about the school level micro-politics of turning round a failing school, but that is for another occasion...

I have a sense of emerging into the sunlight after a long and difficult journey through the shadows. I want to conclude by emphasising that my chief aim in this lecture is to be positive...

It is only because of growing evidence of success that it is possible now to give serious thought to the question of failure. Conversely by imagining what it would take to deal with failure, we encourage success. A policy which is thorough in its approach to failure, will make failure less likely...

By working steadily to deal with failure wherever it occurs, and by ratcheting up expectations over a period of time, failure as defined today can be reduced, and ultimately eliminated (Barber, 1998, abstracted from pp.17-33)

Tale 2: The Bureaucrat

The announcement that a school is failing is always traumatic for its staff, worrying for its parents and unsettling for its pupils. But by January 1997, well over 250 schools had been through this shock. OFSTED and DfEE, having worked closely with each school, are perhaps best placed to reach an overall judgement. It is our joint conclusion that the public identification of unacceptable standards tends to speed up rather than delay recovery, and indeed is often a precondition for it…

By initiating the policy, Ministers stated a generak target of two years within which time a failing school should be: restored to health; making substantial progress towards leaving special measures; or in some cases, heading for closure. Events have proved this to be a realistic aim. Schools under special measures tend either to move quickly towards closure, or to improve quite rapidly….

A medical analogy may be helpful. The treatment that a sick person needs to recover is different from the regime that will make an ordinary person fit. Indeed a fitness regime imposed on invalids may make them worse. The same seems to apply to schools; competence must precede excellence…

Our experience suggests that there are broadly three stages to the transformation of a failing school. The first is acknowledging failure: facing up to the problems, taking charge of the situation, preparing a sound action plan for recovery and establishing commitment….The second stage is to implement the action plan to re-establish the basis competencies of the school: restore leadership, institute sound management, and improve standards of teaching and learning…Only then can the school embark on the third stage, progression towards excellence…

Happily…[an] approach, which blames educational failure on children and parents rather than the school, has been largely overtaken by the belief that it is for schools to achieve the best results of which their students are capable. Expectation expressed both as absolute levels and as progress (or 'value-added') have risen sharply. The evidence available to OFSTED and the DfEE suggests that expectations are rising particularly rapidly in schools under special measures…

The experience in England and Wales is unusual because it combines systematic inspection with a thorough regime of improvement and possible intervention…

In summary, most schools have not been destroyed by special measured: in most cases, they have been revived by them. (Stark, 1998, extracted from pp. 34-43)

Tale 3: The Chair of Governors

The school went into a spiral of decline frighteningly fast. It began with the retirement of a long-serving HT in 1997. The school year 1996/97 was a good one - it was a happy place, there were a number of excellent teachers, the school had a good local reputation and was involved in some new initiatives, results were in line with expectations or better.

The new appointee had not had previous headship experience - nor had any of the other candidates interviewed. She seemed to have good enough experience and be the best qualified applicant but the appointment didn't work out at all, mainly for reasons I am not free to disclose. From Spring1998, some governors were already engaged in damage limitation and had tried to involve the LEA. The LEA became seriously involved in the Summer term but did not produce any effective help until the Autumn term when they were forced to send in temporary replacements for the head and deputy. By then it was probably too late to make enough of a difference.

Any system that allows one individual so much power is mad and dangerous and far too haphazard. More so when there is so much evidence of recruitment problems. The HT's power to damage a school can seem limitless but there were 4 key factors making this all more hideously inevitable:

1) The shortage of, and so inevitably the quality of, applicants for primary headships nowadays means that catastrophes like this are getting more likely

2) The division of responsibilities between LEAs, governing bodies and HTs is as muddled as ever despite all the 'partnership' rhetoric. It is extremely problematic for anyone to curtail the HT's freedom to (mis)manage. But the problem was compounded by the state the LEA was in. The authority itself was about to get two very poor reports from OFSTED. They provided us with too little help too late. OFSTED later commented that the LEA was more an obstacle to school improvement than a help, and was not targeting its resources where the need was greatest. That was certainly our experience at the time. They could and should have stepped in and done a lot more earlier on. Governors at the time found it very hard to work with the LEA and suspected that the authority was more concerned to keep itself out of court and out of the headlines than with the welfare of pupils at the school.

3) A spiral of decline happens when the school desperately needs good teachers, but finds it harder and harder to recruit any. It takes a very determined and competent HT to refuse to accept inadequate agency staff and pursue measures to end the employment of existing staff who are incapable (e.g. teachers categorically identified as not meeting minimum statutory requirements, not supervising children safely, even handling children abusively). There's an economy of teacher supply that means once a school is in trouble, unless you have people fighting very hard you end up with the staff no other school wants. With pupils it's slightly different - parents who have the knowledge and power to choose send their children elsewhere. This creates vacancies. The school is then obliged to take in more children throughout the age range, and that often means children who have been excluded from other schools or who have just moved into the area because for instance they are newly arrived refugees. The school gets little immediate help to provide for these pupils and has to do whatever it can. Classes get more difficult to manage, results look worse. This all began happening about six months before the inspection. The inspection report accelerated it.

4) The national funding context changed with 'fair funding'. I originally supported the idea as in theory it meant equal funding for LEA and grant-maintained schools, now known as community and foundation schools. The school did get more money but has also had to do a lot more with it. Meanwhile the LEA lost a lot of its funds and powers. Our LEA fatally reacted to its loss of revenue by

making huge cuts in its inspection and advisory service. There weren't enough funds or people left to help, when the school needed it.

Tale 4: The School-Teacher

The school is a boys' comprehensive on the borders of two authorities. It has a mainly white, working class catchment, although the intake is skewed towards the less able because of the local ex-grammar, grant-maintained school which applies selection through previous relatives attending (i.e. if your dad attended, you'd get a place). There are around 600 pupils, about 90 of who are on the Learning Development register (special needs). I joined the school as a history teacher in September 1996, and became NUT rep. shortly afterwards. At the same time I started, the school got a new head-teacher as the previous one had died.

The school was inspected by OFSTED in March 1998. The previous year's exam results had risen by 13% 5 or more A-C grades at GCSE (for what it's worth) and the school was described by the Times Ed. as the 5th most improved school in the country in 1997. I was absent due to illness during the build up to, and the initial OFSTED inspection. However, colleagues were told by local authority advisors that they were not concerned about the inspection at all as we were clearly a successful and improving school. On the Friday following the inspection I was told over the phone that the school had been described as 'likely to fail' and that we were being put on 'special measures'. I returned to school the following Monday to a distraught and somewhat disbelieving workplace.

The school was initially failed because of serious weaknesses in management. 88% of teaching seen was satisfactory or better. We were told that structures needed to be put in place to ensure that the exam success was not just a one off and could be maintained. Although I did not see the school as likely to fail, I could at the time see weaknesses in management structure, particularly with the new head who was weak, and had very few leadership skills. He did not always back us up individually, tried to bully us (unsuccessfully for the most part) and seemed very good at doing nothing. He sometimes made the right noises but nothing happened.

Since the initial inspection the standard of teaching and learning has been adjudged by HMI as getting worse and worse (bottoming out on the 5th Inspection and rising again to 75% by the 6th). We worked increasingly hard to do what the inspectors wanted us to do. Early on the head-teacher said all staff were good. Then he began to hint that some staff were incompetent, and started informal incompetency procedures against 5 members of staff. A heavy monitoring process then ensued, giving teachers the feeling we were all useless and meant everyone felt under threat. Staff morale collapsed. Between 1997 and 2000 two thirds of the staff had left to be replaced initially by NQT's (with special dispensation from the DfEE no less), and supply teachers. Several teachers took early retirement.

1997 our exam results were A-Cs 5 or more	33%
1998	32%
1999	22%
2000	26%

Even by their own indicators special measures were making things worse. After the sixth inspection when we all told by the LEA Chief Advisor that we were all one phone-call away from being sacked (yes, really) the head-teacher resigned. He was replaced for one term by a head-teacher waiting to take up a post in another local school. In September 2000 the school found a permanent head-teacher, who had previously been at school on special measures, which had then been closed down, and opened under the ReStart Scheme (new head etc).

On two occasions we had to have our union branch or region come into school to sort out problems caused by the head. We managed to, by having a strong union in the school, stave off some of the paperwork, and extra demands on our time, but on average staff were working between 45 and 60 hours every week.

When discussing with the head the impact of his competency procedures, and the effect on morale of all the monitoring, on several occasions the head said, '*you've* nothing to worry about Constance'. He had no concept of the idea that as a union, rep, as members of staff, as human beings, we were worried about each other.

I've got friends who work at the school this year and apparently things are getting worse in terms of discipline, hardly surprising given the changes the boys had to put up with over the last two and a half years and all the new members of staff, who in themselves are being worn into the ground (and it's only 5 weeks into term). I didn't really realise how hard it was until I left. You become institutionalised into working ridiculous hours, beating yourself over the head because you're not perfect, constantly fearful of being caught doing anything less than the all singing all dancing lesson, having near-nervous breakdowns and worrying about the future of the school. The boys are, apparently, for the first time, asking 'when's the school shutting down?'. Special measures have almost wrecked the school, and hundreds of boys' education.

Tale 5: The Education Officer

F. LEA is located in the centre of a large Midlands city and is predominantly residential. Almost half the population comes from minority ethnic backgrounds, and nine per cent is made up of refugees and asylum seekers. It has enormous disparities in income, wealth, housing conditions and unemployment, and is one of the ten most deprived boroughs in England.

An initial caveat:

I have found it helpful to make absolutely clear when one uses 'LEA' whether one means:

a) The Borough: the area, its characteristics, schools etc.

b) The Council: the body of elected members who make policy.... and decisions about money etc.

c) The Council: the bureaucracy at the Town Hall, the 'corporate centre' and the several directorates.

d) The Education Services Directorate as part of the Council.

In the case of F. LEA this is a crucial distinction.

Politically, in the circumstance of OFSTED inspections of LEAs, it is also critical. Clearly there has been developing understanding in both OFSTED and the DfEE that there is more to a LEA than (d). At the time of our inspection the Audit Commission's involvement was minimal. Since then the Audit Commission has the authority of the national 'Best Value' inspection programme. They can

get everybody now….Then, the DfEE was clear it could only really intervene in (d). It was learning that c) and b) were powerful and usually dominating factors in the equation - in our case deeply damaging….. In F. LEA, the three were/are still divided and hostile! A classic blame culture. No respect or mutual responsibility.

The process of inspection included a good feedback loop …. [with] the lead inspector. Just as in a school inspection the head will be told of the likely final judgement, we worked on the same pattern. By the end of the inspection, we were given to understand that the inspection team would report that there were serious weaknesses (a very accurate judgement and none of it denied) but that there were also signs of hope from the new leadership. The message was 'support your local sheriff'. It was also, keep up the rigour and the pace of improvement. We should expect a re-inspection in a year's time.

The inspection team came with their draft report and gave the same feedback to the politicians. Officers were given a 48-hour turnaround to cross- check facts and figures in the draft report at that time too. The message was consistent.

Then, there was an unexplained hold-up for over a month in the passage of the report from draft to final. We had been told to expect the final version within a week of the feedback to members. These were still the days when Councils published their reports themselves. (Now OFSTED does it.) I have never been told what happened in that month. Some say the Chris Woodhead [Head of OFSTED at the time] came back from his hols and intervened in the report, even though it had been through the full process of OFSTED….. Some say that the Government changed tack in its policy with regard to dealing with recalcitrant local….. authorities…..

When the report came, it came …. as expected. What was unexpected was a letter from Estelle Morris [a Minister of Education]on … the publication day, to say that she… was intervening and we had 30 days rather than 70 for a post-OFSTED action plan. Simultaneously other arms of Government/DfEE suddenly changed tack. It was as if they had all been told to make the case watertight. Michael Barber [DfEE] himself phoned. . up to tell me that our *Excellence in Cities* plan, previously given the green light by the attached HMI, was unacceptable. There was a political meeting at the DfEE with Morris and Barber and our senior officers and politicians, which in effect was a big telling-off. We were under the cosh at all times and on all fronts. The great DfEE juggernaut, inventing itself as it went along, set up umpteen meetings and reportings and deadlines and hoops, paying consultants thousands and thousands of pounds, rolling inexorably towards what is called outsourcing. (The third way???)

If F. LEA wasn't failing before, it fell apart over … this onslaught into self destruction and exhaustion….

I think the original OFSTED report is generally fair and balanced. I think the way in which the government, the DfEE and its hanger-on have managed the intervention, has been disastrous. It was punishing. Made a thousand times worse by the way in which it was managed locally.

As you would expect our own, new, self review processes had identified the strengths and weaknesses of the service. We had plans for improvement and some of the short term ones had already taken effect. The OFSTED inspection brought an objective eye to this, put us under enormous pressure

to gather the most up to date evidence (which was actually helpful) and came to judgements that were similar to our own. The sticky bit is around the political process in F. LEA and around corporate ownership of Education…

Bear in mind that it is hard to pin down exactly when or how the LEA was so designated [as failing], except in Morris' …. letter which was more of an indication that we would go into a process that would bring chaos, disruption of the implementation of any improvement plans, and end up after months of consultants' reports with a recommendation to outsource education. That recommendation finally emerged in a report …[about six months later]

F. LEA is still in the middle of the process….

To date the process has had the effect of

- damaging Council and school relationships further;
- schools distancing themselves from the Council and from each other;
- putting Education Services Directorate in turmoil;
- senior staff leaving;
- draining expertise away from core tasks as well as from jobs;
- lowering morale all round,
- increasing public disaffection with the Council,
- antagonising staff associations and governors,
- and more damagingly than anything, pushing back the centrality of the children in schools, their present and their future.

Between now and a General Election, it seems unlikely that the Government will continue to beat up local …. government, unless they are exceptionally stroppy. F. LEA is actually quite compliant although it likes to behave badly and boyishly from time to time….

The DfEE has its hands full trying to make their third way/outsourcing prove its merit. The latest OFSTED report on Z.LEA included a critique of the performance of AB [the private company brought in to run the LEA]. Y LEA's arrangements are still unsatisfactory with CD [another private company] running their services. The role for accountability is critical here. The DfEE can't get good enough bids from their private contractors for F.LEA and the process there is stringing out further and further. They are up to their eyes with other LEAs (I know that X.LEA and W. LEA are starting the same process at this moment.)

The Audit Commission is coming on strong alongside OFSTED and may in time overtake it as the big judge of performance in local government. The crystal ball is murky on the future of the LEA.

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